

**Verrier Elwin Memorial Lecture**

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***Tribal Identities through  
Crafts***

By

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## TRIBAL IDENTITY THROUGH CRAFTS

The Bhasha Research and Publication Centre has done me an undeserved honour by asking me to deliver the Verrier Elwin Memorial Lecture for the year 2000. As a person who prefers to serve, act and quietly create rather than lecture, I feel both humble and embarrassed at the thought of speaking to you today. Yet I took this as an opportunity to try and crystallize my thoughts on the issues of culture and identity through crafts because I have always believed that the practice of craftsmanship goes far beyond the mere manufacture of products for use and for sale. This is also a rare opportunity to pay homage to Verrier Elwin, who brought the beautiful aspects of tribal life and arts to people who were busy trying to catch up with a synthetic, industrialized, homogenous world where those who were distinctly different may be romanticized but were in real terms being marginalized.

Every human being is born into a certain set of cultural practices which combine to express the very special and specific identity of the group into which the person is born. From birth till death the person is first subjected to and then chooses to adopt a language, dress, food, ritual practices, song, music, art and a set of beliefs that give him or her a sense of belonging. Even if a person gives up one set of cultural practices he adopts another because no one can live without belonging and a sense of rootedness that must find expression through one's external and internal practices.

Those who adhere excessively to the world of science, technology and the predictability of mechanized activity will categorize crafts as a mere economic activity. Certainly, it is an accepted fact that the first potter made pots for home use, but

when the potters wheel was invented, excess production resulted in the search for markets and customers. Organised production brought in profits and therefore the needs of the end user gained primacy over the environmental and cultural influences surrounding the product and the producer. Yet, it can never be argued that the initial product was not first and foremost a result of the producers' own cultural ethos.

Who am I? Where do I belong? What do I symbolize? How am I one with the world around me? These are questions from which no human being can escape. An isolated and individual artist, grappling with a society from which he feels alienated, will seek answers by creating a piece of work that focuses his mind and skills in order to feel rooted and regain a sense of balance. A person belonging to a tribal society does much the same, but without the agony of isolation. The community to which he belongs also asks these same questions through outer expressions of ritual, song, dance, painting and craftsmanship. Only here the answers are commonly arrived at, and therefore accepted as right and valid. A collective reaffirmation of identity results, giving each person in the group a firmer sense of reason, order and belonging.

India's tribal identity covers 7 per cent of the population of the country. Many see them as an integral group, similar in customs, practices and appearances. The tribals of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa have some areas of similarities while the nomadic tribes of Jammu and Kashmir have an old link with those of Gujarat and Rajasthan. The tribes of the North-East are from yet another ethnic stock. What largely holds them together today is bureaucratic and administrative, based on their categorization in the Constitution of India. Under the Directive Principles of state policy "The state shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the

weaker sections of the people, and, in particular of the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation". Section 244(1) Part B of the Constitution deals with the administration and control of scheduled areas and scheduled tribes.

The Scheduled Tribes of Jammu and Kashmir are locally known as Gujjars and Bakarwals. Amongst them the Kunhari group is closest to the original tribes descending from the Greco-Indians and are interrelated with the Gujjars of Gujarat and the tribes settled around Gujjaranwala in Pakistan.

The nomads and their flock move from the hills of Poonch, Rajouri and Riasi in March into the grassy slopes of Sonamarg, Gulmarg and Pahalgam and after their sojourn in the summer pastures and forests of Kashmir they descend again into the Jammu region by November. They carry their entire belongings including blankets, pots and pans, tents, on the back of their ponies and have mapped corridors of their journey over centuries. On the way they establish links with farmers, shop keepers and members of other grazing communities until their social bonds are as permanent as their sojourns are impermanent. As a bridge between the people of Jammu and the people of Kashmir their physical and other characteristics are distinct from either. The earliest historic reference to the Gujjars as a distinct community is found in the Harsa Charita of Bana Bhat, the poet, who writes of them in the seventh century as "huns". The derivation of "juzr" or "khazer" of the Arab historians and the "gheyser" of the Jews are known to be identical with the Gujjars. These Gujjars of Kashmir are said to be part of a larger tribe which dispersed over Afghanistan, Iran, India, Pakistan and parts of central Asia. The first and direct migration was from the Gurjar tribe of Rajputana, Gujarat and Kathiawar, some moved to the Punjab and others went as far North as

Gilgit. The Kunhari Gujjars and Allaiwal Bakarwals who originally came from Hazara in Pakistan moved to Kashmir. Each group retains vestiges of dress and jewelry linking them to their earlier associations. The clan chief functions both as a secular and as a religious leader.

Most Bakarwal and Gujar women wear heavy silver ornaments, from earrings to kurta buttons. Nomadic women wear a tailored cap called a lachka which they stitch and embroider themselves. Similar caps are worn by children in communities of the same origin in Gujarat and Rajasthan. The caps are done with fine needles and thread and cover the whole fabric area while the embroidery done on thick handspun blankets woven by weavers in Kashmir is with thick, brightly coloured woollen threads and embroidered with an awl. Most blankets have brilliant pink and orange floral and geometric patterns interspersed with touches of white, green and yellow. I saw similar blankets available today in Iraq which reiterated the common origin of these tribes. With no written or oral history explaining the nature of their motifs it is clear that cross-cultural currents of exchanged folklore with the Gaddis of Himachal Pradesh, the triangles of Punjab's phulkari embroidery, the brilliant vivid colours of the desert tribes all guide the nomadic woman's hands as she embroiders the rough blankets to create floor coverings or ornamental sacks.

The nomad woman's hairstyle consists of innumerable tiny braids and ornamental hair clips engraved or decorated with a length of short chains. Such specialized jewellery has created a number of silversmiths along the nomad route who cater to their needs and traditions. In all tribal communities a common feature is their link with the settled communities. A ring made of brass by jewellers in the hillsides of Rajouri once had a small route map engraved on it - so permanent are their

routes and their relationships on the way.

Nomad jewellery made of brass, silver or white metal are bold, dramatic and echo designs in other parts of the country. A taveez is a favourite for the neck, or the typical hansdi which is worn by tribals in Gujarat and Orissa as well.

The nomads also patronize many of the local crafts during the course of their transhumance. The use of the finely decorated wooden combs of Thana Mandi near Poonch in Jammu region, wooden lathe-turned ladles of Anantnag in the Kashmir valley, the copper dishes of Srinagar and the dress styles of Punjab demonstrate the unusual and integrating character of the nomadic Gujjars and Bakarwals of J & K as they criss cross back and forth, borrowing, returning, giving and taking from crafts and cultures and drawing the invisible thread of all these into themselves as a unique race. Are these nomadic tribes unique? Yes, in that they are different from their settled partners in the state - but they share the unique characteristics with tribals in other parts of the country and this can be seen by repeated elements in their crafts - the nature of their woven textiles, their jewellery, hairstyles and their oneness with nature's manifestations.

Let us now take a look at Orissa - which enjoys a unique position in the ethnographic map of India for having the largest variety of tribal communities. There are 62 different tribal communities. Next to Madhya Pradesh the state comprises the largest tribal population in the country. Here, even more than in Jammu & Kashmir the crafts visibly reflect the beliefs and cultural practices of the various tribes. Take for instance the dhokra metal casting through the lost-wax process. It is immaterial that the Ghasis of the Scheduled Caste make dhokra items for the Kondh tribals, and not the tribals themselves. They

have adopted the cultural practices of their tribal clientele. Votive objects and dowry items such as animals, birds and human beings in action are made to be worshipped and offered with rituals and sacrifices for increasing fertility in the field and prosperity in the family. The quantity of Kondh dhokra items carried by the girl is the symbol of the status of the bride's parents. Many other communities too, such as the Situhās, Ghataras, Thatarias, Ghasis and Bathudias are also associated with this craft. A wide variety of household items, implements and ornaments are made to be sold at village haats for the local tribal population to buy. Today, a wide range of city oriented items are also made and sold as tribal craft but they are divorced from their real meaning and have no relevance to the lifestyles of their original users. For instance, what would a tribal in a forest do with paper holders, telephone stands, a visiting card stand or a paper weight? In helping tribal areas or impoverished artisans widen their market by employing their skill for contemporary usage, it is only the tribal tag that attracts the undiscerning while the tribal himself is already beginning to get caught into the vortex of industrialization.

Dhokra jewellery has its symbolic and cultural importance in several tribal communities in Orissa. Anklets, toe rings, waist chains, earrings, nose rings, armlets and wristlets abound in a variety of patterns. Colours and designs of jewellery vary from one community to another. The significant aspect of all tribal jewellery is that while all basic forms are replicated among many tribal groups, variations are community-wise rather than individual. In so-called modern and so-called developed societies individualism is extolled to such an extent that there are no forces that bind the individual to a sustaining social discipline. In tribal societies jewellery and ornamentation in any form, embroidered or woven expressions on textiles and the nature of votive offerings (which are usually also hand



crafted) reveal the specific identity of the tribe. The marital status and the social status of the person is also very often expressed through motifs, patterns, designs and colours. All these reiterate the sense of belonging, the sense of community and the interplay of relationships within it.

An object of great fascination amongst tribal communities, particularly in states like Orissa, is the comb. These are made of wood, bamboo, horn and metal, yarn, root fibre, gum or latex from trees. Here again, patterns, designs, motifs and materials vary according to communities. Not only are combs merely for combing and keeping the hair in place but they are also used as necklaces, gifts, sacred objects, magic rituals and as a special form of communicating affection to a loved one. Tribes who specialize in comb making are Santhalis, Dharnas, Koyas, the Kutia Kandha tribals of Phulbani, the Dongrai Kandhas and Lanjis Sanras.

Textiles, too, have a very special role in manifesting tribal identity. Here again, let us look first at Orissa. The Dongria Kandha embroidered shawl is one of the cultural objects of the tribe. They are a primitive group inhabiting the Niyamgiri hill ranges of undivided Koraput and Kalahandi districts. The designs are mostly triangular, circular, diagonal and straight lines symbolizing mountains, streams and houses. They use mostly green, red and yellow thread, which symbolize forest, fertility, unity and peace, gods and sacrifices of animals. Among the Santhals, Beduni, the woman priest wears only a special kind of red cloth which is 15 feet in length and only 3 feet wide. Among Gudhabas, the colour blue worn by a woman priest while performing special rites is said to propitiate the god or goddess. Kutia Kandha women use three types of cloth of which the inner wear is white, the upper garment blue and the waist cloth in either blue or yellow, while the male loin cloth

is of very thick thread. The Lanjia Saora embroider their loincloth in front and back.

In northeastern India, the style of woven shawl is the only expressed signature of each tribe and not only that, there is also a differentiation between the hills and the plains tribes. Other than the Garos most hill tribe women use the loin loom, thus producing narrow strips of exquisitely woven cloth which is then used either to wrap around the head, the waist, around the neck, or joined together as a jacket, waist cloth or shawl. Women of the Riang tribe in Tripura learn weaving at a young age just as young girls from the various communities in Kutch and Saurashtra in Gujarat learn embroidery and our children learn to write A, B, C. Shawls for festive occasions are different from those of daily wear. Priests' shawls are different from the chieftains. The patterns of the Mishimi, Apatani, Wancho and Kangah tribes have elaborate extra weft patterns. Certain colours are used by specific tribes and designs have symbolic meanings. The spiral is a snake or hook, a lozenge with tendrils is a temple or bird, depending on the tribe. It has been said that in Tripura there are legends and songs about woven patterns suddenly coming to life or of a poor orphan girl who married the prince because of her skill in design and weaving. When a community is as closely knit as the tribals are, it is only natural that their cultural expressions would intermingle as well. Weaving, painting, wood carving, songs, festivals, rituals, birth, death, marriages, animals, forests and the gods become a part of a cycle the components of which metamorphose into each other. The Warli tribals of Thane in Maharashtra or the Rathwas in Gujarat or any other groups such as the Birhoor in Bihar live within and are one with nature. Some, such as the primitive tribes in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands still have more faith in nature than in man.

All these tribes are in various stages of development - some more simple and isolated, the others emerging from seclusion into a more interactive, confident and sophisticated mode, while others having lost their lands and roots, are having now to search for survival at the rough edges of the urban jungle. The meaning of "culture" and "development" depends very much on the identity of those who define these words. In the minds of one section of analysts they may be harmonious mirror images. In the minds of disempowered or alienated peoples each concept could be the very antithesis of the other. The most ominous and yet perfectly possible variation is when it is believed that one must be destroyed to lead to the other.

Culture when defined as the sum total of a multifaceted way of life, living and being, shaped by history, society, immediate and distant ancestry, reflections, responses, outer and inner images, is at its most sublime, even as it is also tangible. The collective manifestation of this is the identity of peoples. People without their own culture and the space in which to operate it, suffer such a deep and intrinsic loss of identity that it causes the first stirrings of mass upheavals and the destruction of bodies, minds and spirits.

The word cultured describes a refined stage; matured; evolved into an improved state of being. All these words also describe and can be attributed to the word "development". Ideally, they are the same pathways on which can be measured the tread of humankind's progress but this can be achieved only when the levers of culture and development are operated by the same set of people who define them and when they can decide what each means to themselves. When this does not happen there is a short-circuiting, a clash, and a mismatch, which results in the destruction of one by the other.

The importance of culture in the context of development is highlighted in Edward W. Said's "Culture and Imperialism" in which he writes, "Culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought as Mathew Arnold put it in the 1860s. Arnold believed that culture palliates, if it does not altogether neutralize, the ravages of a modern aggressive mercantile and brutalizing urban existence."

We come here to the key question. Is "modern, aggressive, mercantile and brutalizing urban existence" the other picture of development? And is the culture that is identified with one set of people to be affected by the aggressive and brutalizing culture that emerges out of another way of life?

In India we have 750 million people without access to sanitation, 271.8 million illiterate adults and another 169.3 illiterate females. Two sets of questions emerge. One, can people develop culturally i.e. remain sensitive to beauty and refinement, obtain delight from the creativity of fellow beings and desire to enliven and enrich their existence, in conditions of abject poverty? and second, why are local social customs and lifestyles, traditional shelter, indigenous tools or household utilities or dress not valid as native indices of development? These I believe are crucial questions with which we need to engage ourselves and resolve before we can achieve that "mirror image" of culture and development.

Tribals in control of forest resources, the rivers and streams, employing their technology for the construction of shelter, using their own skills to fashion implements for work, pursuing their own philosophies and beliefs, and all of these giving rise to and sustaining their modes of speech, dress, food, entertainment and economic and social systems, are able to

create their own culture. This culture is by no means base, uncivilized or undeveloped. In fact in many areas such as herbal medicine, methodologies for the conservation of the environment, weaving of textiles, metallurgy, extraction of natural dyestuffs etc., these so-called underdeveloped societies have a wealth of skill and knowledge to share with all those who are struggling to engineer a pattern of sustainable development. If alien ideas of development uproot them from their familiar habitat they are bound to lose the sense of security that all people and nations seek.

While it is progressive to speak of current market notions of development as being the weapon against poverty and overpopulation by the poor, these cultured societies become victims of destructive processes of development and constitute those miserable statistics of 350 million, that is, the destitute forty per cent. A recent film comparing the situation of the cotters and crofters of nineteenth century Scotland with Rajasthani women in twentieth century India clearly lays out the similarities in conditions of those who have had no say or choice in the mode of development suitable for them. They began their descent into destitution with the privatization of common lands, and changes in patterns of land use, which together destroyed the base of subsistence farming. These pauperized communities had till then been reasonably self-sufficient not only in food, but in dress, household articles, ornamentation, entertainment, creative and leisure activity, oral history and traditions, arts and crafts, carpentry and a host of other skills.

A glance at what history tells us about crafts, artisans and largely western notions of what is "modern" or "developed" brings us to the third proposition in the study of the relationship between culture and development. In simple words, this could

be termed as "capture through culture". It is the colonization of people achieved through the invidious, sophisticated and sinister method of pushing a certain view of modernization and development through cultural images which then act as instruments to transform local or indigenous cultures into imitative, timid, passive consumers of the dominant oppressor culture.

We see this all too clearly at Surajkund Craft Melas, Bengal Craft Village, Puri Festivals and Rajasthani Fairs which are motivated by the need to develop tourism, which means the earning of dollars. "Tribals" dance or demonstrate craftsmanship in front of tourists clutching plastic credit cards and mineral water bottles. Crafts and craftspeople are synthetically ethnicized and pageantry is stage-managed. Crafts are being highlighted, not specifically for the benefit of craftspeople but to exhibit the "traditional heritage of India". Because of this orientation crafts are not required to be upgraded for genuine daily use by the people of the local cultures. Large copper vessels are displayed in artificially constructed exhibit villages, but plastic buckets take over at waterless taps and polluted water tanks in real life ones. An artistic coconut grater shaped in metal like a swan's neck is fine museum fare but as the middle class city housewife smiles happily at her mixi-grinder, the village woman buys her third-grade-factory made implements at village haats. As artisans lose their real markets to modernity, they lose their initiative for creativity and enterprise. Indian craftspeople do not practice the making of crafts as an activity isolated from their way of life. We have seen that amongst the pastoral and nomadic communities artifacts ranging from cattle belts, buttermilk churns, leather shoes, blankets and quilts, jewellery, wall hangings and ornamentally embroidered garments are unmistakably imprinted with colours, symbols or designs of community identification. Artisans within the

community and men and women in their leisure hours create most of the goods needed in their daily lives. Any intervention to break the pattern sets into motion those forces which destroy not only skills and aesthetics but a sense of community and social identity as well.

We should therefore attempt to integrate more effectively those who live within their own special cultures, their patrons, (who unfortunately occasionally become their exploiters), and those who study and document their lives, so that our tribal brothers and sisters are neither made to feel like objects being prepared for an ethnographic museum or like lesser beings who need to be uplifted.

Tribals live with their crafts with both deep attachment as well as simple detachment. Do we, as outsiders impose meanings that are unnecessarily sophisticated or complicated where, in fact, the simplicity of their given meanings encompass the essence of a greater philosophy? Their worldview, their deeply felt truths, their internalized understandings give birth to their various forms of cultural expression. It is their way of controlling, ordering and having a dialogue with their world. The arts, crafts and weaves of tribal communities are an integral and important part of the vocabulary of that dialogue. I would wish that in memory of Verrier Elwin, all of us do appreciate the subteleties of that dialogue and facilitate its true progress.